



The Zealots of Mount Athos: Leaven of True Orthodoxy Today

By Hiermonk Seraphim (Rose)

What is this fire which our Lord came to spread on the earth? It is, in the teaching of the great Orthodox Father of the 19th century, Bishop Theophanes the Recluse, the zeal of an Orthodox Christian, which is inspired by the Holy Spirit. He writes: "This is that fire which the Lord came to send on the earth and which, falling on the earth of our nature, devours there everything inessential, but everything needful it remelts and purifies, The Apostle had it in mind when he wrote to the Thessalonians: Quench not the Spirit (I Thes. 5:19). For although this Spirit is the grace-giving Spirit, still its presence in us is witnessed by the burning of spiritual zeal; and it is quenched when this zeal is quenched. He had precisely it also in mind when he instructed the Romans: In carefulness not slothful; in spirit fervent; serving the Lord ('Rom. 12:11).



"The fire of true Orthodoxy is still alive in many places: in the Catacomb Church of enslaved Russia, in the persecuted True Orthodox Christians of Greece, in the maligned Russian Church Outside of Russia, in the Zealots of Mt. Athos."

"Carefulness and lack of slothfulness are zeal itself; fervency of spirit is the witness of its presence and activeness; serving the Lord is the direction and spirit of this zeal. Guiding such zeal, the same Apostle commands the Philippians: Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely> whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things . And the God of peace shall be with you (Phil. 4:8-9). Behold what it is about which the soul which has come to life is zealous, the soul which is united with God and as a result of such zeal preserves this union. For this the God of peace will remain

with him—a good than which there is none higher.”[1]

The saints whom the Church of Christ puts before us as examples in her calendar are, in this understanding, precisely the zealots of God. In all ages the Church has chosen for the instruction and inspiration of the faithful the most fervent and uncompromising of her zealots: her fathers and ascetics, martyrs and confessors, from Simon Zelotes, the bridegroom at Cana of Galilee who was moved by the miracle of Christ turning water into wine (John 2:1-11) that he left the banquet and his bride and everything of this world in order to follow the Lord; to Maximus the Confessor, who when informed that all the Orthodox Patriarchs are now in communion with the apostate Patriarch of Constantinople, would only say, even if all the world shall enter in communion with the Patriarch, "I alone will not"; to St. Mark of Ephesus, who in his zeal for Holy Orthodoxy stood firm even when the Orthodox bishops at an "ecumenical council" signed the *Unia* with Rome; to Athanasius of Brest, who gave his life in order not to betray Orthodoxy and become a *Uniate*. But why make a list of individual zealot saints, when one cannot open the life of any saint of Christ's Church without reading of the divine zeal by which he pleased God, expressed in such a typical phrases as "the Saint began to labor with greater zeal," or "being zealous for the Glory of God and the purity of Orthodoxy."

Zeal is the very center of the life of Christ's Church, and therefore those who look with disdain at our present-day Orthodox zealots are either not genuine Orthodox Christians, or else they have formed mistaken notions of zealousness. Orthodox zeal, needless to say, has nothing to do with soulless phariseeism or the attachment to the letter of the Church's law at the expense of its spirit; nor with emotional revivalism which some substitute for zeal; nor, certainly with the combination of phariseeism and rationalism which prompts some misled converts to think they "know better" than the Holy Fathers and ascetics themselves what Orthodoxy is. Such kinds of "zeal," being only human, fade away, and only the true zeal inspired by the Holy Spirit remains ever fresh and burning. Bishop Theophanes writes: "Do not confuse one zeal with another. Spiritual zeal entirely expends itself in pleasing God and saving the soul; it is full to overflowing with the fear of God and it preserves unceasing heedfulness toward God, in every way being concerned to allow to nothing either in thoughts or in feelings or in words or in deeds that is not pleasing to God, as indicated by one's conscience, which it preserves as clean as a mirror; it preserves the heart from any kind of attachments to anything save to God and Divine things, and in hope it is translated to another world, having cut off all earthly hopes" (p. 86).

Such true zeal, as the Holy Fathers teach us, is not at all "fanaticism"; it is rather the norm of Orthodox Christian life. Anything less than such zeal is not a path of "moderation," as some pseudo-theologians would tell us; it is rather lukewarmness, coldness of heart, the beginning of apostasy or stepping away from that heartfelt and fervent service of God which is the only kind that the Lord accepts. The presence of this zeal is surely one of the signs of the continued existence of Christ's Church. We know that near the end of this world the love of many shall wax cold (Matt. 24:12), and that then the numbers of Christ's chosen flock will be small: When the Son of Man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth? (Luke 18: 8.) But as Christ is faithful to His promise that the Gates of hell shall not prevail against His Church (Matt.16: 18), we know that, in the midst of a cold and dying world, Christ's faithful will continue to burn with the fire of that zeal which our Lord came to spread on the earth, and which cannot be extinguished as long as His Church lives!



Schema-Hieromonk Theodosius

Thus, the sad state of the Orthodox world today need not unduly distress us. In viewing the sorry spectacle of almost all the Orthodox Churches and "jurisdictions" one can only conclude that here is the exact opposite of what Christ came to give: almost universal lukewarmness and indifferentness, extinguished lamps that give no more light, a salt that has lost its savor, an Orthodoxy that seems to be solely a matter of habit, faith swallowed up in worldliness, producing senseless compromise and apostasy. This sight is surely enough to dampen the zeal of any Orthodox Christian—until one stops to realize that all of this is Orthodoxy in name only, that without the divine zeal that characterizes true Orthodox life it is not Orthodoxy at all, but only the extinguished remains of a once-burning fire. And then one learns to look elsewhere to find true Orthodoxy today, which according to the promise of our Saviour will continue to live until the very end of this world; and he who has kept even a spark of true zeal within himself will recognize that this zeal burns still in the world, being kept alive not where numbers and fashion and conformity to the world prevail, but where there are a striving and a burning for God's truth and righteousness. The fire of true Orthodoxy is still alive in many places: in the Catacomb Church of enslaved Russia, in the persecuted True Orthodox Christians of Greece, in the maligned Russian Church Outside of Russia, in the Zealots of Mt. Athos.



Abbot Athanasios of the Esphigmenou Monastery

The Center of the 20th Century Zealot movement is unquestionably, as it has been many times before (for example, in the 18th century with St. Nicodemus and the Kollyvades movement), the Holy Mount of Athos. It is indeed fitting that the Holy Mountain, sacredly dedicated to the Most Holy Mother of God, set apart from the world as an island of Orthodoxy, and made glorious by a multitude of ascetic struggled and fighters for Orthodoxy, should take the lead in this, perhaps the beginning of the last great battle for Orthodoxy before the Second Coming of Christ. In the world, relationships among different Local Churches and even within a single flock can be very complicated, and often the Church's economy must excuse situations which fall short of the Orthodox standard of zealousness. It is very difficult to remain a zealot in the world, and that is why the faithful of those few remaining Orthodox Churches which strive to be truly Orthodox look to the monasteries, and above all to the Holy Mountain, to derive inspiration for their own fight.

To be sure, the battle for Orthodoxy is intense also on the Holy Mountain, and unfortunately several monasteries are openly anti-Zealot, actually commemorating the apostate Patriarch of Constantinople, *while others follow an unsteady and ultimately impossible path of compromise, rightfully having ceased to commemorate the Patriarch, but not yet breaking off communion with other monasteries which do commemorate him.* Only one monastery — Esphigmenou — and that quite recently, has taken the pure Zealot stand of breaking off communion with the commemorators, and for the rest the Zealot movement is one of individuals, cells, and sketes on the Holy Mountain — some 300 monks in all, which, though far from a majority, is nonetheless a considerable proportion of the monks remaining on Mt. Athos.

Little is known in the world of these lonely battlers for true Orthodoxy, and their very battle has been little appreciated. Many worldly people see their battle as one over "details" such as the preservation of the Church calendar or the non-commemoration of the Patriarch. Alas, these lukewarm Christians do not understand the Faith of Christ, nor the wiles of the enemy of man's salvation. With apostasy just as with sin, the devil never offers an obvious evil, but only tempts by means of small "details" that build up to form an entire broad path which leads to destruction. The introduction of the papal calendar in the 1920's was only a test, by which to see how many could be tempted on to the path of renovationism which has become so obvious today; and few are they who have the courage to turn back once they have entered this path: each step on the way proceeds logically and inexorably from the one preceding it, and the only way to save oneself from it is to refuse to take the first step. The commemoration of the Patriarch has now become even less of a "detail" than the revision of the calendar. Even as in the days of St. Maximus the Confessor, it is a dogmatic issue; for he who commemorates an open heretic, who declares that the Orthodox Church is not the Church of Christ but only a "part" of it (see the Enthronement Address of Patriarch Demetrios), thereby joins himself to his heresy and takes him for his leader on a path whose ruinous outcome is now surely more than evident.

Here we shall present the words of three present-day Zealots of Mt. Athos: one from among the desert-dwellers or hermits, one from among the skete-dwellers, and one abbot of a ruling monastery. Let the Orthodox world know from their firm stand that true Orthodoxy is still alive in the world!

The Russian Hermits of Karoulia

Unknown to the world, Russian Zealots still exist on Mt. Athos, even after the Russian monasteries have been left virtually empty. Their center is Karoulia, an area of hermits' cells built on and sometimes dug out of the steepest cliffs of the Holy Mountain. Spiritually they descend from the holy elder, Schema-Hieromonk Theodosius, who reposed in 1937. A direct disciple of Elder Theodosius, Schema-monk Nikodim, continues to live, with two other monks, in the cell of his elder, preserving unaltered his monastic rule and strictness. Being remote from the world, they have seen perhaps more clearly than those living in the world the theological and spiritual foundations of the troubles of the Russian Diaspora, and they remain, as a matter of principle, in communion only with the Russian Church Outside of Russia, refusing even to commemorate at Liturgy anyone from the other Russian "jurisdictions." In a recent letter Father Nikodim explains something of the beginning of the Zealot movement on Mt. Athos in this century:

"Zealots: This name was taken by the Greeks from the Holy Apostle Simon Zelotes. From 1924, as soon as the new calendar appeared in all Greece, a division occurred on Mt. Athos. Four monasteries accepted the new calendar. In a short time, there were found in the Holy Lavra of St. Athanasius certain manuscripts — the anathemas against the new calendar of Patriarchs Jeremiah and Cyril. After reading these manuscripts, three monasteries returned to the old calendar, but Vatopedi monastery remained in the new calendar and remains in it to the present time. The other nineteen monasteries, without accepting the new calendar, did not break off communion with the new calendarists and did not separate from the new-calendarist Patriarch, and many of them commemorate him to the present time.

"Some cell and desert-dwellers of Mt. Athos became zealous and separated from the Patriarch, ceasing to commemorate him, but did not cease contact with the monasteries which commemorate the Patriarch. A part of the Greek and Moldavian desert dwellers and our Russian inhabitants of Karoulia ceased contact also with the cell dwellers who had communion in prayer with the monasteries, and from this zeal the name "Zealots" originated. There are over 300 of such Zealots among the monks of Mt. Athos.

"Two elders became the leaders of the Zealots: Schema-monk Callinicus, a Greek, an advisor of Elder Theodosius; and the spiritual father Ignatius, a Bulgarian, the elder of Father Theodosius; and also my elder, Schema-Hieromonk Theodosius of Karoulia. "Such a division on Mt. Athos exists right up to the present time (1971)."

The Skete-dwellers of Mt. Athos

The largest number of the Zealots of the Holy Mountain live in the sketes: St. Anne's Skete, New Skete, Kafsokalyvia Skete, the Skete of Xenophontos, the Skete of St. Panteleimon belonging to Koutloumousiou, and others. While being administratively dependent on one of the twenty ruling monasteries, each group of skete dwellers is free to take the Zealot stand or not as it wishes. In recent years the Zealots in the sketes have found a spokesman in the young Schema-monk Theodoritos, a resident of St. Anne's Skete, who has published several books in Athens: one on the life of St. Nectarios: Desert Dialogues on Ecumenism. which refutes this heresy: and, most recently, a book on frequent Holy Communion. No reader of these well-reasoned works will succumb to the illusion of some Orthodox "modernists" that the Zealot movement is born of ignorance and backwardness! Here is the challenge of the Zealots of the Holy Mountain to the Orthodox Christians of the world.

The "Zealot" Movement and the Service to the Orthodox Faith on Mount Athos
By Theodoritos, Monk of St. Anne's Skete

The "Zealot" Movement on Mt. Athos appeared at the time of the forcible and anti-canonical calendar change imposed by the Patriarchate of Constantinople and by the Church of Greece in 1924. And while none of the "worldly" clergy protested effectively or with any result, on the Holy Mountain, on the other hand, tens of hieromonks and a fair number of monks reacted drastically by cutting off all communion with those who had accepted the innovation, and likewise with those who continued to follow the Old Calendar, yet remained in communion with the New Calendarists, such as the Slavic Churches and some Patriarchates.

The question arises: Did they have the right to do this ? Certainly yes, given that in the past also (9th century) the great and holy Abbot Theodore of Studion likewise broke off communion with all those in communion with Presbyter Joseph, the priest who had blessed the unlawful fourth marriage of Emperor Constantine VI.

Yet in the present case, in the anti-canonical introduction of the new calendar, the gravity of the innovation was much greater, since it concerned the whole body of the Orthodox Church. The calendar innovation, which did not come from or lead to any pastoral need of the body of the faithful, meant a direct retreat before Papism.[2] while at the same time it served the realization of the Patriarchal "Message" of 1920, according to which the various Christian denominations and "Churches" should not be considered "as alien and strange to each other, but as akin and related in Christ and fellow-heirs, and fellow-members of the body, and fellow-partakers of the promise in Christ (Eph. 3 :6) [3]. And time has shown that the Zealot fathers as well as the lay faithful who have followed them were by no means wrong.



Some Zealot Fathers of the Sketes of Mount Athos.
Hieromonk Maximos and Father Theodoritos with other
Fathers

Since then one innovation has followed another, while everyone considered them "details," and not "dogmatic" subjects, which for the innovators are the only ones that call for breach of communion, as followers of "courtesy" have said in contradiction of history and tradition... But behold! Beginning in 1965 (December 7) the above "dogmatic" subjects also appeared, namely the lifting of *anathemas*, various cases of joint prayer of Orthodox with different heretics, Papists and Protestants, and even the administration of sacraments to Papists by certain Orthodox hierarchs and priests... And, instead of being moved by all this, Orthodox bishops and other clerics and monks, as well as the "wise" University theologians, continue still to forbear, finding this time new passwords to appease the disturbed conscience of their pious flock, such as "economy for a time" and "collective opposition," thus suppressing all private initiative and any attempt to arouse "God's people" to check the accursed Ecumenism. Unfortunately, however, even the Holy Mountain has not been able to dismiss the ideology of the "Ecumenist" Orthodox! Even today those who "commemorate" or are in communion with those who "commemorate" consider the Zealot fathers to be "fanatics" and "backward." In spite of their wisdom, they are indifferent to, or rather ignorant of the fact that by being in communion with any Ecumenist, and consequently with the successor of Athenagoras, his equivalent, Demetrios I, they have, as it were, become *Uniates*!

We write this because since 1968 the commemoration of the Pope was inserted into the Holy Diptychs of the Patriarchate, in conformity with the declaration made at the time by the late Athenagoras [4]. At the same time, the Roman Pontiff was not only frequently publicly commemorated even before the Patriarchal Synod, but most triumphant hymns (*polla eti Despota*, "Many Years to the Master") have been sung in his honor[5]. A pattern marking the present situation on the Holy Mountain is the fact that all the Zealot fathers happen to be "dependents" (those who live in huts and sketes, not in monasteries, on which they are administratively dependent), i.e., poor and obscure by the external standards and criteria of this world, but select and honorable in the eyes of God, faithfully following the lawful voice of their lawful pastors [6]. An admirable exception among the monasteries of the Holy Mountain is the holy monastery of Esphigmenou, which has lately (1971) broken all communion with those who commemorate the Patriarch or are directly or indirectly in communion with him, while maintaining communion only with the nearly 250 Zealot fathers. Because of this, it has become an object of grief to those who control and exercise pressure upon the Holy Community [7].



Schema-Monk Nikodim

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In our opinion, the precision in question observed by the Zealots and required by the holy canons is unique in the Orthodox Church and is a sound resumption of Byzantine "Studitism" We write "unique," since the Churches with which the Zealots are in communion - the Church of the Russian Diaspora under Metropolitan Philaret and the Greek Church of the Old Calendarists - are obliged to practice a certain amount of economy (which in our opinion is now unwarranted) by reason of the environment and of the conventions which govern them, especially the former. However, it should be duly emphasized that the time has come to cease all these economies, to announce the heresy which is now spreading and coming within the hearing of the simpler people, else the union of communion between them is in danger. And we say this not for personal reasons or from excess of zeal, but because of the propaganda of the Ecumenists and the lukewarm Orthodox, who consider any such economy to be agreement with their line and thus a chance for them to

announce that nothing separates them, nor is there any difference between them and the above two Churches, since they also are acting by "economy"... Such seductive proclamations, very cunningly composed, have been appearing in Greece since 1969.

As a small leaven full of life, the strictness of the Zealots daily leavens the select Orthodox bread for the faithful who ever hunger after truth, which bread is always destined to be made in the oven of confession with the wood of compliance with and conformity to the holy traditions in the midst of a society waxing cold in love and true faith! (Matt. 24:12.)

Practicing the scriptural stand fast and hold the traditions (II Thes. 2:15), as well as the watchword of the holy Abbot who has inspired them: "If any be monks at the present time, let them show it in deed. And the deed of the monk is not to tolerate, even by chance, any innovation of the Gospel,"[8] — let the zealots trumpet together "let us stand aright," while at the same time, by the prayers of the Holy Fathers and Confessors, they preserve their most holy eucharistic altar pure of all heretical communion until the Second Coming of Christ! Let all the faithful imitate them in deed and word!

The Holy Monastery of Esphigmenou

Before the eyes of 20th century humanity the once-glorious Orthodox world is entering the last stages of its dissolution, as the consequences of earlier compromises and false steps finally become most obvious. Even now the burnt-out shells of "Orthodox" church organizations are making their political preparations ("preparing the people") for the coming *Unia* - no longer merely with the Latin church, but with the whole of apostate and unrepentant Christendom. More than ever, the Zealots of Orthodoxy are a despised and often persecuted minority, and on Mt. Athos in particular the battle has become fierce. But as the great crisis of Orthodoxy approaches, more and more the followers of "moderation" come to see the error and folly of their position and make their choice - and some are choosing the Zealot side. Just recently, in 1971, the monastery of Esphigmenou with its 45 fathers became the first monastery of Mt. Athos to take the full Zealot stand of breaking off communion with the commemorators of the Patriarch, and soon Archimandrite Haralambos and the fathers of Simonopetra monastery expressed their support for this position in view of the pressures which the Holy Community is bringing to bear on the new Zealots. In his reply to the Holy Community of July 21, 1972, the abbot of Esphigmenou, Archimandrite Athanasios, expresses well the Zealot determination today:

"You call our Monastery zealot,' desiring to show your aversion by this appellation. Could you find a sweeter name for us? The Lord Himself is 'zealous': Thou shalt worship no other god: for the Lord, whose name is jealous, is a jealous God (Ex. 34: 14) [9]. As a logical consequence, we His servants should be called zealots and should be proud of this name.

We are writing to Your Reverence as monks to monks, and for the last time we remind you of these words of the New Testament: But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, LET HIM BE ANATHEMA (Gal. 1 :8). The only goal of all of us is the Heavenly Kingdom, for the sake of which we have left the world and have suffered the afflictions of the monastic life. Why should we shut our eyes in order to hear at the end the ANATHEMA of the Apostle Paul? The way is hard, there are insults, persecutions, etc., but we have engaged ourselves to all this when we put on the great Angelic schema. "We inform Your Reverence that we cannot give in even on one-thousandth of the above, lest we fall under the ANATHEMA... For if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ (Gal. 1 :10)."

Bishop Theophanes concludes his definition of Orthodox zeal in the following words:

"In defining the proper direction of zeal, the Apostle writes to the Romans: I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service . And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God (Rom. 12:1-2). The renewing of the mind is the renewing of our spirit by grace. Having come to life, it removes itself from the deeds of this age and is zealous only to please God, offering its whole self to God as a sacrifice living and holy, and therefore also acceptable to God.

"And so you see what zeal is. what is its power and what its direction! Inasmuch as the significance of this zeal is so great, it is worth the labor of determining whether we have it or not. And so, labor at this!" (Ibid., p. 89.)

May the words of this Holy Father be a command to us last Christians, and may our contemporary Zealots (for whom let us offer fervent prayer!) truly be for us the leaven of a sacrificial bread which the faithful offer to God by their flaming zeal for Him! Amen [10].

References

[1] Bishop Theophanes, *What Is the Spiritual Life?* Moscow, 1914. Reprinted by Holy Trinity Monastery, Jordanville, N.Y., 1962. Ch. 23, pg. 88,

[2] Alexander Kalomiros, *Against False Union*, Boston, 1967, p. 34.

[3] Prof. John Karmires, *Dogmatic and Symbolic Monuments of the Orthodox Church*, Athens, 1953, vol. 2, p. 951.

[4] Metropolitan Philaret, "*First Sorrowful Epistle*," 1969.

[5] Ar. Panotes, PeacemakersJ Athens, 1971, pp. 203-4, 207.

[6] "All those who pretend to confess the sound Orthodox Faith, but are in communion with people of a different opinion, if they are forewarned and still remain steadfast, you must keep not only incommunicatives, but must not even call them brothers, (St. Basil the Great).

[7] *Lera Koinotis*, i.e., .the supreme administrative and judicial body of the Holy Mountain, consisting of 20 representatives of the ruling holy monasteries.

[8] St. Theodore the Studite, Answers, M.P. G. 99, col. 1049D; details in the work of Theodoritos Monk, Desert Dialogues on Ecumenism, Athens, 1971, p. 306.

[9] In Greek (as in Slavonic) "jealous" and "zealous" are one and the same word.

[10] Father Seraphim Rose, "The Zealots of Mount Athos: The Leaven of True Orthodoxy," *Orthodox Word* 46, no. 5 (September-October 1972): 219-228.